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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 CONAKRY 000105

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SUBJECT: FIRST LADY SAYS ALL IS WELL

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. During a private meeting with Poloff on April 15, the First Lady emphasized that all is well in Guinea. She said that relations between the president and the prime minister are "fine," that the president is making his own decisions without undue influence from his entourage, and that most of the country's villagers are at peace and unconcerned with the politics of the capital. The First Lady agreed that elections are critical and that "they will happen." Although she pretended that she is not involved politically and that all is well, the reality is that the political situation is highly volatile and she is busy behind the scenes trying to hold everything together. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S) Poloff met privately with Guinean First Lady Henriette Conte for about an hour on April 15 at Mme Conte's residence, located in the heart of Conakry's military base. This was the second time Poloff had met Mme Conte, the first being an official visit in late 2007 when Poloff publicly delivered a personal letter from First Lady Laura Bush to Mme Conte thanking her for her participation in a luncheon during the UN General Assembly. Although the First Lady was formal and somewhat stiff during the first meeting, she was very warm and welcoming for the private meeting. She seemed comfortable and the overall feel was quite casual despite the obvious opulence of her surroundings. Mme Conte has a reputation for being shy, but she spoke willingly and openly throughout the discussion. President Conte had left the residence shortly before Poloff's meeting.

ALL IS WELL

¶3. (S) Mentioning the numerous rumors about the deteriorating relationship between the PM and the president, Poloff asked the First Lady to discuss how the power sharing arrangement is working out. Mme Conte emphatically stated "I assure you, all is fine between the PM and my husband. Don't believe everything you hear." According to the First Lady, the two leaders are working well together and there is no reason for concern. She made the same statement about the relationship several times throughout the conversation.

THE PRESIDENT IS FINE

¶4. (S) In response to a question about the president's health, the First Lady said "he is doing fine." At one point in the discussion, she said "my husband has been sick since 2002; how many people have died since then and my husband is still here?"

ADVISORS ARE FOR ADVICE

15. (S) Poloff asked about the president's entourage and whether certain individuals are manipulating the political situation as many people seem to believe. The First Lady stressed that the president makes all his own decisions. She said that members of his entourage are advisors and they offer advice, but they do not make the decisions. She said many people may speak to him and that he must weigh their counsel as he comes to his own conclusion. However, the First Lady did say that members of the entourage have differing agendas, although she did not elaborate.

16. (S) Referring again to rumored dissension between the two leaders and pushing on the issue of interference from within the president's entourage, Poloff gave the example of the controversial prefect the president recently appointed to Kindia. The First Lady said that all of the ministers, governors, prefects, and sous-prefects were appointed by the PM, emphatically adding "the President has not appointed anyone in this administration." She added that if a new prefect was appointed, the appointment would have had to come through the Ministry of Interior and Security to the PM for approval before going to the president. (COMMENT. Embassy contacts indicate that the president made this decision unilaterally. END COMMENT).

PEACE ABOVE ALL ELSE

17. (S) The First Lady repeatedly said that the country is

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calm and will remain calm, noting that the president is committed to maintaining peace. She said that the president agreed to the power sharing agreement and the consensus government because he was not willing to jeopardize the country's peace and stability. "Is it normal for the president to cede all his power and let someone else appoint a new government? He did that because he wants peace," she said.

CHANGE, AND THEN WHAT?

18. (SBU) Discussing the political situation in general, Mme Conte said that people continue to talk about change, but no one is able to define it or clarify what they would do once they got it. "People say regime change, get rid of the president, or get rid of the PM, but then what?" she asked. The First Lady pointed out that the PM has been in office for less than a year, but that people are already frustrated with his performance. "A year is a very short time," she said, "he needs more time to do what people want him to do." Mme Conte emphasized that Guinea most needs U.S. assistance with respect to these discussions of change and reform. "We need to help people understand that change does not happen overnight." She said that her husband brought democracy to Guinea, but that it is still a very new democracy.

19. (SBU) Poloff agreed that many of the advocates for change lack a defined objective or any kind of program for achieving their goals. Poloff stressed that in the many meetings the embassy has with various interlocutors, American officials urge contacts to clarify their definition of change and then publicize a concrete agenda to achieve that change. Giving weak governance as an example, Poloff said that when political leaders talk about reducing corruption, embassy officials challenge them to explain how they will avoid the same problems if they are in power. The First Lady agreed and said this is exactly the message that needs to be sent.

¶10. (SBU) Poloff also emphasized that the upcoming legislative elections are critical to maintaining stability. Mme Conte agreed and said that elections are very important and "they will happen."

LET THEM EAT CASSAVA

¶11. (S) Turning to the general economic conditions and the growing popular frustration with food prices, the First Lady said "Sekou Toure ruined this country. Before Toure, we ate all kinds of things, but now people think that they cannot live without rice." She agreed that rice is a Guinean staple, but said that there is plenty of other food in the country that can sustain people's needs. "We have cassava, corn, fornio (a local grain), potatoes - we have everything." According to the First Lady, people are simply insisting on rice even though they are in no danger of starving if they are willing to temporarily alter their diets. "The problem is that if you tell people to eat corn or fornio, they will tell you that only the Peuhl people eat those foods."

¶12. (S) The First Lady also commented on labor union efforts to close the borders and ban exports. She said that this is a bad plan that has not worked in the past. Mme Conte pointed out that the economic issues are related to rising world prices and closing borders will only exacerbate the problem. She mentioned the march that was being planned for April 10 (reftel) and questioned "What would they be marching for, against who?"

¶13. (S) Mme Conte emphasized that the political situation in Guinea is stable and the people are calm. She said that the political troubles are centered in the capital, but that most of the people, especially those in the villages, are living their lives peacefully. "They do not have any interest in what is going on in Conakry," she said.

I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE

¶14. (SBU) Referring to a recent package of visa applications for her staff to travel to the U.S. with her, Poloff asked about the First Lady's upcoming trip. Visibly confused, she said "what trip? I'm not going anywhere. Why do you think I'm going to the U.S.?" When Poloff explained that the embassy had applications for six individuals supposedly

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accompanying her to the U.S., the First Lady got angry. She said that she had noticed her passport missing a few days ago and had asked her staff where it was. When they told her it was at the U.S. Embassy, she said she asked them what it was doing there since she already has a U.S. visa that does not expire until 2009.

¶15. (SBU) Mme Conte said she was aware of only one person traveling to the U.S. and provided the name to Poloff. She asked that the embassy send over copies of all the other applications so that she could review them. "Whenever you get visa applications from my office, you can send them over to me and I will tell you whether they are legitimate or not," she said.

COMMENT

¶16. (S) Although the First Lady was very open in her speech, she had a clear message she wanted to send: everything is fine. She denied having any political role, at one point saying "I'm just the spouse." However, other contacts and information point to exactly the opposite: all is not well and the First Lady is working behind the scenes to try and

hold it together. Despite the fact that Mme Conte was unwilling to dig too deep beneath the surface, the meeting was still a very good one. She was comfortable and relaxed and the meeting ended with the door being open for continued discussions. When the political situation erupts into more of an immediate crisis, it will be important to have open lines of communication with the First Lady who is a significant behind the scenes actor.

¶17. (SBU) On the consular issues, Embassy sent the requested documents to the First Lady on April 16 and will be following up on possible visa fraud. END COMMENT.
CARTER